CHAPTER 5

Shiʿite Theodicy, Martyrdom and the Meaning of Suffering

An important feature distinguishing the Shiʿite Islam from the Sunni mainstream is its theodicy of martyrdom as quintessential human suffering. According to his definition of Sociology as the study of meaningful social action, Max Weber considered the world religions of salvation as grand solutions to the problem of meaning of life. As such, they had to make sense of human suffering by reconciling it with the justice of God. In other words, they had to answer the question of theodicy: if God is good and just, what is the meaning of the suffering of the innocent? According to Weber (1978, 1:518–22) the problem of theodicy is particularly acute in the most strict of monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam.

Weber (1978, 1:519) further noted a very interesting possible linkage between theodicy and messianic revolution: "One solution [to the problem of theodicy] is to assure a just equalization by pointing, through messianic eschatologies, to a future revolution in this world." Half a century later, Peter Berger (1967) called the fundamental Christian belief that the Son of God endured crucifixion—the ultimate suffering—to redeem humankind a grandiose theodicy of suffering, further asserting that its collapse due to secularization ushered in an era of world revolutions. The Shiʿite theodicy of suffering, which has no equivalent in Sunni Islam, was constructed on the basis of the tragic death or martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet, Husayn in 680 CE. Not only has it not collapsed in modern times, but it continues to serve as a powerful idiom of world revolution against tyranny and oppression.

The very origin of the Shiʿite sects is in fact the movement of the Penitents (*tawwābun*) in 684–85. The penitents were the Kufans who accused themselves of abandoning Husayn after inviting him to take over the caliphate and of thus being responsible for his death in the desert of Karbala. (Halm 1997) Their sense of guilt was undoubtedly what called for penitence and self-abasement in the procession which later became an annual ritual of commemoration in the month of Muharram culminating in the ʿĀshurā on its tenth day. The seventh-century penitents' emphasis on sin and repentance, however, developed into an elaborate theodicy of martyrdom and the suffering of the Shiʿa as (innocent) victims. The guilt for the martyrdom of Husayn and his family, together with usurpation of the rights of the subsequent Imams (and

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2016 | DOI 10.1163/9789004326279_007

their alleged poisoning), came to be placed squarely on the shoulders of the usurpers and tyrannical governments. It was not the wronged Shiʿite sect but the wrongdoing usurpers who were guilty and sinful. Later development of the theodicy also postulated compensation in the hereafter for Husayn, Lord of the Martyrs, who could intercede for his oppressed Shiʿite flock and obtain salvation for them in the other world. As the Shiʿa considered themselves the saved sect (*firqa nājiya*), the salvational value of Husyan's intercession came to the foreground.

The Shiʿite Buyids who established themselves as Sultans in Baghdad under the caliph's suzerainty in the mid-tenth century, introduced the Muharram procession in the capital of the caliphate itself within two decades, apparently restricting participation at first to wailing women with uncovered, disheveled hair. (Rahimi 2012:207–08) Although the Buyids were overthrown by the Seljuqs who are credited with the so-called Sunni restoration, Shiʿite notables in the cities of central Iran, many of whom served in the Seljuq government bureaucracy in the twelfth century (Arjomand 1984:56–57) generously supported public recitals in the marketplace extolling the virtues (*manāqib*) of ʿAli and other Imams, especially Husayn which highlighted his martyrdom. (Mahdjoub 1988) It is clear from the detailed account of the Sunni-Shiʿite rivalry in the cities of central Iran in the second half of the twelfth century in ʿAbd al-Jalil Rāzi's *Kitāb al-naqḍ* that these eulogy recitals were part of sectarian rivalry in the public space, and were as such mixed with slanderous rigmaroles on the Prophet's wife and ʿAli's foe, ʿĀyisha, and the first three caliph. The theodicy of Hysayn's suffering, therefore, did not stand out in its full starkness. It was with the eminent Imami scholar of the Hilla, Razi al-Din ʿAli Ibn Tāwus (d. 1266), who endorsed the overthrow of the ʿAbbasid caliphate by the Mongol Hülegü, that the theodicy of Hosyan's death was canonized in *al-Luhuf ʿalā qatli al-tuhuf* (Grief on the Killing of [God's] Gifts [to mankind]).

The very broad popularization of the recitals on the martyrdom of Hosayn and his family, however, did not derive from the spread of Imami theology but rather from that of antinomian Sufism in Iran and Anatolia during the Il-Khanid domination. The Islamicization and Turkification of Anatolia and northwestern Iran in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was particularly important for ecstatic popular devotion to ʿAli and Husayn. Anatolia was thus a fertile region for the growth of unorthodox millenarian movements, beginning with the Bābāʾi uprising in the thirteenth century. Various groups of antinomian dervishes—Akhis, Qalandars and Abdāls mushroomed in the region. (Karamustafa) Alongside this Shiʿite-tinged popular Sufism, there grew a genre of folk epic had developed in Anatolia, including several *Abu Muslim-nāma*s,

a *Mukhtārnāma* and a *Junayd-nāma*, which claimed sundry quasi-historical heroes devotees of the Imams rising on their behalf, and with popular devotion to Husayn came the theodicy of suffering and martyrdom. Thus Fazlallāh Astarābādi, the leader of the Hurufiyya, the most important Sufi, cabalistic movement of period who was executed in 1396, evoked it thus:

> Husayn of the Age am I, and each worthless foes a Shimr and a Yazid
> My life is a day of mourning, and Shervān my Karbalā.

He accordingly extolled deliverance through martyrdom:

> He who rememberth me loveth me; and he who loveth me passionately desireth me; and him who passionately desireth me I passionately desire; and whom I passionately desire I slay; and of him whom I slay, I am the blood-wit. (Both passages cited in Arjomand 1984:73)

This theodicy of suffering stimulated messianic hope and the reactivation of the mahdistic tenet: there would be a second coming (*rajʿa*) of Fazlallāh as the Mahdi and the "Lord of the Sword" (*sahib-e sayf*). (Arjomand 1984:73–47)

The Hurufiyya movement spread in the Timurid empire through much of the fifteenth century but ultimately failed. At the end of this era of religious eclecticism, the second half of the fifteenth century, the martyrdom of Husayn figured largely in popular religion of the Sunnis and Shiʿa alike, and was in fact taken up and developed in eastern Iran by the Naqshbandi philosopher and moralist, Mullā Husayn Vāʿiz Kāshifi (d. 1504–5/ 910).

The Safavid millennial Sufi movement that gathered momentum in the latter part of the fifteenth century in northwestern Iran and Anatolia similarly drew on the idiom of the popular devotion to Husayn. The Safavids recruited among Turkman tribesmen and some of the survivors of the millenarian movement of Shaykh Badr al-Din, son of the kadi of Samawna, and their offspring (Sohrweide, pp. 119–23), doubtless including some of the Abdāl. Badr al-Din's rebellion had been suppressed in 1416, but antinomian, Shiʿite-inflected Sufism remained widespread. The missionaries (*khalifa*s) of the Safavid Sufi order found in the topoi of his martyrdom in Karbalā by Yazid and his henchmen the symbolic arsenal for mass mobilization of the Turkman nomadic tribesmen dispossessed by the centralizing Ottoman imperial state. The songs of their Qizilbash (redhead) reciters (*ozan*s) identified the Ottoman governors as oppressors (*zālim*). (Yildirim 2008:148–49) This poem, recited by one such *ozan*, Pir Sultān Abdāl, around 1500, presents the youthful charismatic leader

of the Safavid movement, Shah Esmāʿil, as the avenger of his putative ancestor, Husyan, against the evil Yazid, with whom the Ottoman oppressors are identified:

Lānet olsun sana, ey Yezid Pelid,	Curse you, o evil Yezid
Kızılbaş mı dersin söyle bakalım!	Say, you call us Kizilbash!
Biz ol āşıklarız ezel gününden,	We are bards, since time immemorial
Rāfızī mi dersin söyle bakalım.	Say, you call us Rafizi!
Ey Yezid geçersen Şah'ın eline,	O Yezid, if you are ever caught by the Shah
Zülfikārın çalar senin beline.	He will strike you with the Zulfiqār [ʿAli's sword]
.....	
Muhammed sizleri taş ile eze,	May Muhammad crush you with stones,
Rāfızī mi dersin söyle bakalım.	Say, you call us Rafizi!
Pir Sultan'ım eder lānet Yezid'e,	Pir Sultan [the bard] curses you,
Müfteri yalancı yezidler size,	All you unbelieving, liar Yezids.[1]

(Cited in Yildirim, p. 354n1168)

Husayn's martyrdom was furthermore given a millennial inflection by being presented as his uprising (*khoruj*), and their youthful Shaykhoghlu Ismāʿil similarly called the Lord of Uprising (*sahib-e khoruj*) and presented as his messianic avenger of the blood of Husayn. As such, he would lead a world revolution against oppression (*zolm*) and to avenge Husayn's martyrdom. (Yildirim 2015) The self-inflicted vengeance of the Penitents could easily turn other-directed and become channeled against present-day tyrants and usurpers, and with much greater violence.

In the subsequent decades of the sixteenth century the popular songs of the Safavid revolution were introverted into haphazard forms of penitence and self-inflicted violence. The cursing of the first three caliphs was separately ritualized in the Safavid periods and the Muharram rituals become more differentiated and distinct and thus gained increasing coherence. The Shiʿite theodicy of suffering thus became an important element in popular religion. In the closing decade of Shah Tahmasp's long reign (1524–1576) and under the patronage of his powerful daughter, Pari Khān Khānum, it also found powerful literary expression in the poetry of Muhtasham Kāshāni (d. 1587). The affliction

1 I owe the English translation to Can Ersoy.

and martyrdom of the house of the Prophet—the quintessential prototype of senselessly unjust suffering in the world—is endowed with cosmic significance and finds an other-worldly resolution:

> When they summoned mankind to the table of sorrow, they first issued the summons to the hierocracy of the Prophets.
> When it came to the turn of the Friends of God, Heaven trembled at the blow which they smote on the head of the Lion of God [i.e. ʿAli]
> .....
> Then they tore up from Madina and pitched at Karbalā those pavilions to which even the angels were denied entrance.
> Many tall palm-trees from the grove of the 'Family of the Cloak' did the people of Kufa fell in that plain with the axe of malice
> .....
> And the Trusted Spirit [Gabriel] laid his head in shame on his knees, and the eye of the sun was darkened at the sight
> .....
> That company whose ranks were broken by the strike of Karbalā, at the Resurrection in serried ranks will break the ranks of the uprisen
> .....
> Then [finally] they raise on a spear-point that Head [i.e., the head of Imam Husayn] from whose locks Gabriel washes the dust with the water of Salsabil [a river in paradise]. (Browne, 4:173–7, translation slightly modified)

Under Shah ʿAbbās I, the Great (1587–1629), the haphazard earlier forms of Muharram mourning were transformed into carnevalesque rituals of transgression promoted by the Safavid "theatre state." (Rahimi 2012:217–34) ʿAbbās I's state-building by counter-balancing the Qezelbāsh tribal contingents with a standing army of musketeers under royal slaves, who, in imitation of the Ottoman regime, were also employed in provincial administration, went hand in hand with the building of a Shiʿite nation in the core of his empire that long preceded the birth of modern Iranian nationalism. The territorialization of the Muharram cult by state-directed transformation of penitence and self-inflicted violence into carnivalesque battles among city guilds and youth organization of "urban moieties" (Perry 1999) was a significant element in what we may somewhat anachronistically call Shiʿite nation-building by Shah ʿAbbās I. The pattern for Muharram combat rituals was set in his new capital, Isfahan and under his supervision. Other ceremonies, such as a camel sacrifice and

its ritual ingestion led by Isfahan's chief constable, were also instated. (Rahimi 2012:216–34)

Theatrical representation of the events of Karbalā appear decades after the fall of the Safavid empire. Fath ʿAli Shah (1797–1834) gave considerable impetus to the development of passion plays (*taʿziyeh*) on the martyrdom of Husayn and the tragedy of Karbalā. These were at first performed in the houses of notables as a part of the ceremonies of the month of Muharram alongside long recitations of the afflictions of the house of the Prophet, known as *rawrza-khʷāni.* During Fath ʿAli Shah's reign a small number of fixed *takiyehs* (theaters) were built specifically for *taʿziyeh*, most notably that of his foreign minister, Hājji Mirzā Abu'I-Hasan Khan. Under Muhammad Shah, the prime minister, Hājji Mirzā Āqāsi, built a sumptuous *takiyeh*, which was attended regularly by the crown prince, the high officials of the state, and the high ranking diplomats. Mindful of the hostility of the hierocracy, the Sufi prime minister was eager to establish a measure of control popular religion and to that end greatly encouraged the development of the Muharram passion plays. *Takiyehs* built by the notables mushroomed in Tehran and the n cities: A French diplomat wrote that during his stay, in Tehran in 1842–43, fifty-eight *takiyehs* were built. The process culminated in the erection of the famous Dawlat (state) *takiyeh* under Nāsir al-Din Shah (1848–96). On the literary plane, Qāʾāni and Yaghmā Jandaqi produced variations in verse of the themes of the Karbalā tragedy, and, with the advent of printing, the scripts of s eighty of the passion plays were produced and sold to an avid public. (Arjomand 1984:240)

The elegy (*marthiyeh*) by Qāʾāni (d. 1853) is particularly interesting for the contrast it offers to the above quoted one from the sixteenth century Muhtasham:

> What rains down? Blood! Who? The Eye! How? Day and night! Why?
> From Grief! What grief? The Grief of the Monarch of Karbalā!
> What was his name? Husayn! Of whose race? ʿAliʾs!
> Who was his mother? Fatima! Who was his grandsire? Mustafā [the elected, i.e., Muhammad]!
> How was it with him? He fell a martyr! Where? In the plain of Māria!
> . . .
> Was he an innocent martyr? Yes! Had he committed any tort? No!
> What was his work? Guidance! Who was his friend? God!
> Who wrought this wrong? Yazid! Who was Yazid?
> One of the children by Hind! By whom? By semen of bastardy!
> . . .
> Was the dagger ashamed to cut his throat?

> It was! Why then did it do so?
> ....
> In order that he would become an intercessor for mankind!
> What is the condition of his intercession? Lamentation and weeping!
> Where any of his sons also slain? Yes, two!
> Who else? Nine brothers! Who else? Kinsmen!
> Had he no other son [surviving]? Yes, he had! . . .
> Alone? No, with the women of the household! What were their names?
> Zaynab, Sakina [Sukaina], Fatima and the poor hapless Kulthum!
> (Browne, 4:178–81; translation modified slightly)

While still offering the other-worldly power intercession given to Husayn as the deep reason for his martyrdom, Qāʾāni is less interested in its cosmological significance than in the personal suffering of Husayn and his family, notably his sisters and daughters (Aghaie 2005), and in highlighting the tyranny of Yazid and the other bastards who killed the Imam at his bidding. Theatre had put the focus on personalities, including the evil men who killed Husayn and the humiliated women of his family, rather than on theological explanations.

It is important to note that the vigorous development of the *taʿzieh* took place despite the opposition of the jurists in the upper echelons of the hierocracy. However, the hierocracy could not curb the development of *taʿzieh* because of its organizational amorphousness. The disapproving *mujtahids* had no disciplinary machinery for controlling the clerics who took part in them. The *taʿzieh* and *rawrza-khʷāni* conjoined with it became the source of livelihood for a new type of religious professional, typically drawn from among the dispossessed real putative *sayyids*: the *rawrza-khʷān*, who was modestly paid and had a low status.

The *taʿzieh* became tremendously popular among the people. Not only were they affected as audience, but they actively participated in the flagellant processions accompanying the ceremonies. We also know that the guilds of the bazaar competed in the preparation of the feast of Husayn and the decoration of the *takiyeh* of Hājji Mirzā Āqāsi. The *taʿzieh* enhanced the political domination of the monarchy and the patrons among the nobility who controlled this branch of religious activity. This is especially soin that poems in praise of the Shah preceded the beginning of *sineh-zani* (chest beating) during the ceremonies. Furthermore, because of its tremendous cathartic effect on the spectators, the ceremonies acted as channels for discharge of potentially rebellious energy and thus aided the domestication of the masses. Yet, these ritual reenactments of the tragedy of Karbalā made the Shiʿite theodicy of

misfortune a source of powerfully emotive notions and imagery, which could also be drawn upon to motivate communal oppositional action, both by the hierocracy and by chiliastic revolutionaries.

A hierocrat and a revolutionary chiliast at one, Ayatollah Ruhallāh Khomeini would not miss the chance to draw on the Shiʿite theodicy of suffering for motivating the Iranian masses as perceived victims of worldly imperialist arrogance (of the United States) to overthrow the last Shah as the Yazid of the age. "Every day an ʿAshura, every grave a Karbalā!" (Kippenberg 1981) With slogans like this, the clerical organizers of the massive and repeated demonstrations harnessed the theodicy suffering as a source of motivation of the Shiʿite Iranians, especially those who commemorated it every year in the Muharram processions, to the cause of the Islamic revolution that ended twenty-five centuries of monarchy in Iran.

Yet, the subversive potential of transgressive, carnivalesque Muharram passion plays was by no means spent in Khomeini's revolutionary enterprise. The ruling juristocracy of the theocratic republic cannot fully control popular manifestations of the Shiʿite theodicy of suffering any more than could the powerful hierocracy of the Qajar dual structure of power. As a recent study of the Arab minority in the Iranian port of Bushehr shows, the Karbalā has been modernized, and retooled as "subaltern" oppositional political theater against the oppressive Persian domination in the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Rahimi 2014)

The theoretical implication of our survey is that the impact of the theodicy of suffering on the pattern of motivation of social action, like that of other meaningful ideal types, is historically contingent and its analysis therefore needs to be historicized. Under different historical circumstances, the Shiʿite theodicy of suffering could foster various attitudes with different sociopolitical implications: quietism and the quest for other-worldly intercession of the martyred Imam, millenarian activism rooted in the belief in deliverance through martyrdom, periodic ritual discharge of violence in carlinalesque battles, cathartic identification with holy personalities in passion plays, and revolutionary activism stemming from a revitalized cult of martyrdom.

References

Aghaie, K. S. 2005. *The Women of Karbala: ritual performance and symbolic discourses in modern shi'i Islam*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Arjomand, S. A. 1984. *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Organization and Societal Change in Shi`ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Browne, E. G. 1924. *Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols., London: T. Fisher Unwin.

Berger, P. L. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy*, Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday.

Halm, H. 1997. *Shiʿa Islam. From Religion to Revolution*, A. Brown, tr., Princeton: Markus Wiener Publisher.

Kippenberg, H. G. 1981. "Jeder Tag ʿAshura, jedes Grab Kerbala. Zur Ritualisierung der Straβenkämpfe im Iran," in Beliner Institut für Vergleichende Sozialforschung, *Religion und Politik im Iran*, pp. 217–56.

Mahdjoub, M. J. 1988. "The Evolution of the Popular Eulogy of the Imams among the Shiʿa," in in S. A. Arjomand, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shiʿism*, 1988, pp. 54–79.

Perry, J. R. 1999. "Toward a Theory of Iranian Urban Moieties: The Haydariyya and Niʿmatiyya Revisited," *Iranian Studies*, (32).

Rahimi, B. 2012. *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran. Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590–1641 CE*, Leiden: Brill.

———. 2014. "Subaltern Modernities: Mediated Experience, Ritualization and Being Modern in the Arab Iranian Community of Bushehr" in S. A. Arjomand, ed., *Social Theory and Area Studies in the Global Age*, State University of New York Press, pp. 389–414.

ʿAbd al-Jalil al-Qazvini al-Rāzi 1952. *Kitab al-Naqḍ*, Jalāl al-Din Husayni Urmavi, ed., Tehran.

Weber, M. 1978. *Economy and Society*, Roth, G. and Wittich, C., eds, 2 vols., Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yildirim, R. 2008. "Turkomans between Two Empires: The Origins of the Qizilbash Identity in Anatolia (1447–1514)," PhD Dissertation, Bilkent University, Ankara.

———. 2105. "In the Name of Husayn's Blood: Karbalā Memory as Ideological Stimulus to the Safavid Revolution," *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 8.2.